

Dear Santa Fe County residents:

I hope that you all had a warm and restful Thanksgiving holiday. Maybe global climate change made it a bit unseasonably warm, come to think of it.

As my husband and I were cleaning up from our Thanksgiving dinner, I was reminded of the movie "Alice's Restaurant." I don't know how many of you saw that movie back in the sixties. But there was an interesting part of the movie that showed the disaster that occurred when the main character played by Arlo Guthrie (as himself) decides to help his friends with whom he is staying clean up garbage around their place and dispose of a truckload of trash on Thanksgiving Day after dinner. The dump is closed that day, so they drive around trying to find a place to get rid of the trash. They do find a pile of garbage at the foot of a cliff, and as mentioned in the song, Alice's Restaurant, "...we decided that one big pile is better than two little piles, and rather than bring that one up we decided to throw ours down." A lot of havoc ensues after that, and Arlo ends up getting arrested. (I don't think he did that in New Mexico, in case you were wondering.)

Solid waste disposal is one of those things that we all take pretty much for granted. We expect to get rid of trash easily and cheaply. After all, it isn't worth anything, so why should we pay to get rid of it?

I am now participating as a member of the County Solid Waste Task Force that is investigating how we can make our solid waste service more cost effective (i.e., not require so much of a subsidy from our General Fund) and how to encourage more cost-saving recycling in the County.

The purpose of this email is to give you a picture of how we dispose of solid waste in the County, how much it costs the taxpayer, and to explore how we might save the Santa Fe taxpayers money going into the future.

Solid Waste Disposal in Santa Fe County

To begin with, the City has its own mandatory solid waste utility service which picks up both waste destined for the landfill and recyclables.

The residents and businesses in the unincorporated areas of Santa Fe County have two different methods of trash disposal. The first is to use one of the County-operated Transfer Stations, of which there are seven scattered throughout the County. They accept materials that are destined to be landfilled, and recyclables can be dropped off -- for free. Two of the Transfer Stations also accept green waste, i.e., plant materials that people have cleared out of their yards.

The second method for disposal of trash in the non-urban areas of the County is to hire one of the private haulers to pick it up. I believe that all the private haulers also accept recyclables, but at least one of the haulers charges extra to pick them up and will not accept glass. We believe, although we do not have exact numbers, that about 70% of the trash in the County is picked up by private haulers and then transported to either the landfill or to the facility that prepares the recyclables for transport. This leaves only 30% that goes through the County Transfer Stations.

The Santa Fe County landfill is located in the Caja del Rio area. It is run by the Solid Waste Management Authority (SWAMA) which is an independent governmental authority with its own management. Even though SWAMA is not administered by the City or the County, the policies are set by a Board that has 3 City Councilors and 3 County Commissioners on it. It is important to note that SWAMA has its own budget that must be balanced every year. It cannot dip into a General Fund like county and city governments. SWAMA's income is largely from tipping fees at the Caja del Rio Landfill.

The amount of trash disposed at the landfill comes from a number of different sources. Here is the tonnage from each source for Fiscal Year 2011:

City of Santa Fe	67,406 tons
Private Haulers	44,820 tons
BuRRT	16,515 tons
Santa Fe County	11,580 tons
Cash Customers	4,957 tons
San Miguel County	1,881 tons

SWAMA also runs BuRRT, the Buckman Recycling and Transfer Station located at the site of the now-closed former City landfill. This is where all recyclables are processed in the County. BuRRT also accepts loads of trash to be landfilled; customers pay fees in proportion to the weight of the load. The newly-opened Household Hazardous Waste is also located at BuRRT and is open Fridays and Saturdays.

Although SWAMA receives income from the sale of recyclables, this does not add substantially to its overall income, since processing of recyclables costs a fair amount. Recyclables are sorted in a very labor-intensive operation and then bundled in different ways, depending on the material, for shipment to the businesses that purchase them. With the ongoing recession, the prices for recyclable materials have plummeted due to reduced demand for products produced from them. Nevertheless, recycling can usually be cost-neutral.

Cost to County Residents

Those residents who live in the City get trash pickup once a week, for which they pay a mandatory fee of \$17 per month (\$204 per year).

The cost of trash pickup for those people who live in the unincorporated area of the County and contract with private haulers is typically much higher -- as much as \$170 per quarter (\$680 per year), particularly in areas with few customers or that are difficult to reach.

On the other hand, the cost of a pass to the Solid Waste Transfer Stations is a relative bargain at \$75 for a yearly 24-punch card (unused punches cannot be carried over to the next year). County staff recommended doing it this way, so that people can make trips to a Transfer Station every other week, rather than stockpiling trash at home. It is important to note that when people use a Transfer Station, they do the labor and pay the cost of fuel for transport; hence, they pay less than they would to a private hauler.

The best bargain of all is to separate out your recyclables and buy bag tags at \$5 for 5 tags. Recyclables can be disposed of for free at a Transfer Station, with the rest of the trash to be landfilled put into large garbage bags marked by bag tags. My husband and I use this method, and our solid waste disposal cost per year is about \$25 (apart from labor and fuel costs, of course).

I want to emphasize again that recycling at the Transfer Stations is free, but those who use the bag-tag method of trash disposal really reap the financial benefits.

County Budget for Solid Waste Services

The County alone currently spends just over \$2 million to run the 7 Transfer Stations. Salaries and benefits for personnel is almost half the budget (\$950,000). The other costs are tipping fees (\$470,000), fuel and maintenance for the vehicles (\$285,000), insurance (\$46,000), capital for new equipment and other needs (\$284,000), and other miscellaneous costs.

The income for this service comes from three different sources: permit sales (\$436,000), the Environmental Gross Receipts Tax (\$346,000), and the County General Fund (\$1,293,000). General Fund monies can be used for any County need or expense; by budgeting money for the solid waste operations, the County Commission is setting a priority. It is important to note, however, that both City people (who pay for mandatory pick-up service) and County people who choose to pay for private haulers help subsidize the Solid Waste Transfer Stations.

One can make the argument that taking care of solid waste benefits all of us, so it is appropriate for people who do not use the Transfer Stations to help pay for them. But I just want to make sure you understand -- fully -- how our solid-waste system operates.

The Economics of Recycling

Even though selling recyclables is not a big money-maker, this activity is close to being cost-neutral. On the other hand, running a landfill is very expensive. We have one of the most expensive landfills in the state, although the prices charged are quite low compared to most other states. It costs \$40 per ton of trash buried for the County or the City, and \$50 per ton for private haulers and other counties.

Why is our landfill so expensive? One issue is that it is built on basalt rock, so it costs a fair amount to blast out the rock to make the "cells" (i.e., holes in the ground) where the trash is deposited. Another reason is that we have a state-of-the-art landfill with regard to health and safety. The cells are lined with thick plastic liners to ensure that the groundwater is completely protected in the area. In addition, a system of pipes was installed to collect the gases produced in the tightly packed landfill, which are then flared to minimize air pollution.

If we recycled more in the County, we could reduce landfill costs and save money. Recycling would also extend the life of the landfill. Twenty-five or 30 years from now, it is going to be nearly impossible to find another piece of land on which to put a landfill. Right now, people who

live in the Caja del Rio area are, understandably, not happy with the current landfill. You can imagine that failing to do more recycling now and more population growth in the future will result in a garbage catastrophe for the next generation.

Right now we estimate that only 11% of the trash in Santa Fe County (including the City) is processed as recycled material. We could do much better than that. Huge amounts of cardboard, paper products, plastics, and cans are still being put into the landfill. What a waste!

Unfortunately, right now our County's solid-waste system fails to encourage recycling: It takes extra work for people to separate out their recyclables, and in some cases people have to pay extra to recycle.

I would like to say a hearty "Thank you!" to all those people out in the County who do recycle. I know that everybody who goes to all the extra effort to do this does it out of concern for the environment and their community. (Of course, with bag-tags, they also get the biggest bang for the buck at the Transfer Stations.)

How do we Encourage More Recycling?

Education is often suggested as a good method to increase recycling. However, it has been shown that education has maybe a 5-10% effect on the amount of recycling that actually occurs in a given jurisdiction. Two other methods are far more effective: (1) give people a financial incentive to recycle, or (2) mandate recycling. For example, I have heard of areas in other states where people are required to separate landfill trash from recyclable trash. When a homeowner or resident does not comply with this, the hauler will not pick up co-mingled recyclables and other trash. Under such a system, people learn in a hurry to do the right thing.

Financial incentives, on the other hand, are less strict but can still be quite effective. One way to accomplish this is to charge for landfill trash by weight or volume and to make recycling free. It is fairly straightforward to envision how we could do that at Transfer Stations. However, it is trickier to implement such incentives for those using private haulers in our County. And yet, since 70% of solid waste in the unincorporated area is handled by private haulers, we must figure out how to encourage recycling for residents who use them.

Next Steps

The County Solid Waste Task Force is investigating how the County Solid Waste Utility can be more cost effective. It is also considering how this service should be funded. Is it appropriate for the whole population of Santa Fe County to subsidize the Transfer Stations that are only used by roughly 15% of the population? Could those General Fund monies be used for some other County need? How can a system be implemented that will actually encourage recycling?

Currently, the County, the City, and SWAMA are partnering to do County-wide surveys to get a better picture of exactly how solid waste is being managed. County staff have been investigating a number of proposals in the last month. The Task Force will get a report from them on possibilities and recommendations. I will keep you informed.

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